

Cheese Trade

Joe Saunders

Cheese has formed an important part of the English diet since at least the medieval period. For centuries English rural labourers ate cheese as a prime source of fat and protein. 'A weye of essex chese' was referred to in *Piers Plowman*, the famous late fourteenth century poem.¹ English cheese was already being exported to the Continent by this time with East Anglian cheese from Essex and Suffolk the first choice for maritime transport in the medieval period.² This was especially so of cheese from the 'wood pasture' area of High Suffolk which was preferred for naval supply and shipped in large quantities down to London into the middle of the eighteenth century.³

By the late seventeenth-century certain areas of England began to acquire reputations for the quality of their cheese. Farmers began to afford to concentrate on cheese production, buying in other goods they needed out of their profits. William Shakespeare in 1602 could write 'Am I ridden too with a wealch goate? With a peece of toasted cheese?' while in 1771 Smollett referred to 'dealing in cheese'.⁴



Floris Claesz van Dijck, *Still Life with Cheese*, c. 1615. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

The Cheshire cheese trade expanded rapidly to become a popular variety nationally around the middle of the seventeenth century. The natural quality of the grass in the meadows and pastures of the Cheshire Plain was considerable, even before the introduction of clovers and

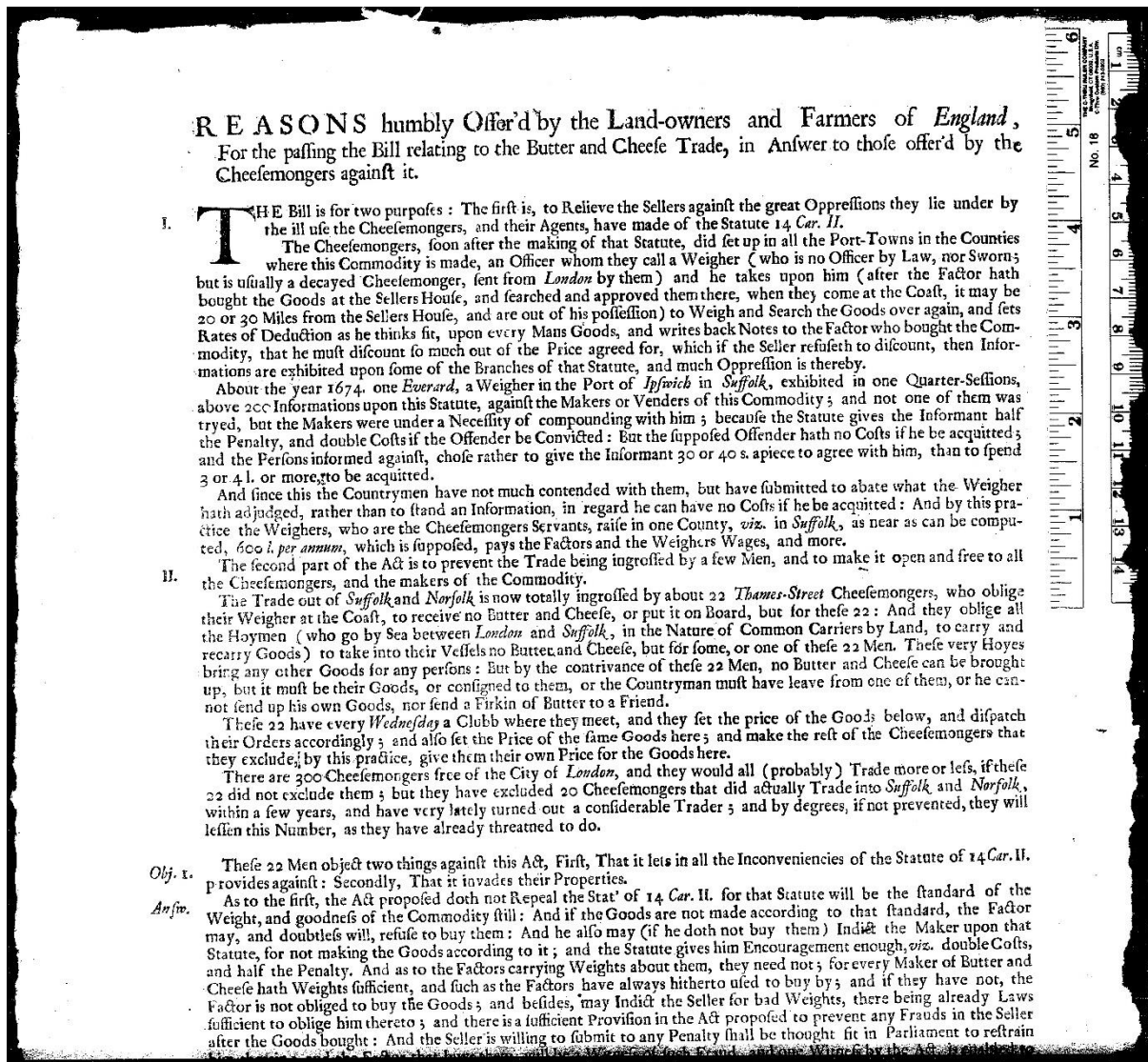
¹ Hoyt N. Duggan and Ralph Hanna (eds.), W. Langland, *Piers Plowman* [Oxford, MS Laud Misc. 581], 5.92.

² Peter J. Atkins, 'Navy victuallers and the rise of Cheshire cheese', *International Journal of Maritime History* 34:1 (2022)

³ Ibid.

⁴ W. Shakespeare. *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602), V.v.138; T. Smollett, *Humphrey Clinker* (1771), I.126.

improved grasses. Cheshire is also fortunate in the local availability of salt. Together, this meant that farmers with only small or medium-sized herds could produce cheese. Factors then arranged export by river and along the coast to London and the naval ports and overland to market towns and fairs. In Cheshire between 1660 and 1740 five out of six farmer's probate inventories record cheese, sometimes in special cheese chambers.⁵ North Shropshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Suffolk, and the Dove Valley (between Staffordshire and Derbyshire) all prospered from the cheese trade also. Though prices for Cheshire cheese remained the highest, suggesting it was considered the best.



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Reasons humbly offer'd by the land-owners and farmers of England for the passing the bill relating to the butter and cheese trade in answer to those offer'd by the cheesemongers against it (1691). [Wing R533A, Sutro Collection, Courtesy of Sutro Library, California State Library. Image produced by ProQuest as part of Early English Books Online, a sub-database of Sutro Library. www.proquest.com. Image published with permission of ProQuest. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission.]

⁵ David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 81.

By 1750 all cheese-making areas that were to be of national importance in the following century were already sending their cheese to market in London. The coming of the railways enabled cheese producers in remote areas, such as Wensleydale, to compete on a national scale. The advent of refrigeration in the twentieth century enabled even further travel for the cheese produced. This allowed the dominance of particular varieties within England as well as even wider export and the import of foreign cheeses.

The later twentieth century saw a shift away from farm-produced cheeses to factory-made ones alongside an increased import in Continental cheeses. The staple of the village pub lunch, the Ploughman's was created in the 1960s by the Milk Marketing Board to sell more cheese. A Specialist Cheesemakers' Association was formed in 1989 to protect and preserve the craft.⁶ In the twenty-first century English farmhouse and artisanal cheeses have returned to wide popularity.

References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 81.

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W. Shakespeare. *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602)

T. Smollett, *Humphrey Clinker* (1771)

[About SCA \(specialistcheesemakers.co.uk\)](#)

⁶ [About SCA \(specialistcheesemakers.co.uk\)](#)